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# Native English speakers' authority in English

YING WANG

Do Chinese speakers of English care about native English speakers' judgments?

## Introduction

Given the unprecedented spread of English, native English speakers (NESs) have been estimated to number 508 million by 2050 (Graddol, 1997: 27), while a bold estimation of speakers of English is 2 billion by 2050 (Crystal, 2008: 4–5). The international demographic profile of English presents a scenario whereby the development of English depends on how this language is used by non-native English speakers (NNESs), who are obviously in the majority for English use (e.g. Brumfit, 2001: 116; Crystal, 2008: 6; Graddol, 1997: 10; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011: 7–8). While the importance of the number of English speakers globally is acknowledged, English in China remains a particularly interesting area for linguists. Not only English is widely learned in China, but also Chinese speakers of English are increasingly involved in intercultural encounters. In Graddol's (1997, 2006) discussion of the future of English, a comprehensive account is put forward about China, a country that has statistical significance for the development of English, given its large population of people who know English and its economic development. As Crystal (2008: 5) notes:

> [I]f India is the significant factor in relation to second-language speakers (in the sense of countries where English has some sort of special status), then China is surely the corresponding factor in relation to foreign-language speakers (in the sense of countries where the language has no official status).

In this sense, it would seem that China will play an important role in shaping the profile of English use in the future. If this is an acceptable hypothesis, the development of English in China has implications for the future world of English use.

Currently, there is 'a state of delicate balance' between 'the majority of the world's English users', who use English as a lingua franca (ELF) in multilingual contexts, and the 'control over the norms of the language' that rests with NESs who use English in monolingual contexts (Seidlhofer, 2004: 209). This observation is applicable to Chinese learners and users. Despite the aim of being able to use English in intercultural settings, English language teaching and testing have been exclusively oriented toward native English in China (Wang, 2013; Wen, 2012: 371). The research into ELF lends both theoretical and empirical support to the argument that the status quo needs to be challenged and that the concept of ELF emerging in intercultural communication suits the wider communicative context of English today (e.g. Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2000; Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, 2014; Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer,

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2011). Despite the thought-provoking debate among scholars and researchers, a down-to-earth question is how Chinese users and learners, who are agents of the development of English in their own lives, perceive the 'control over the norms' of English in their context of English use.

This paper is motivated by my experience of teaching the concept of ELF in a university in China. While I often invited discussion of Chinese speakers' own English on the basis of the ELF concept, I was frequently asked the following question by students and sometimes questioned by some university teachers of English: 'What do NESs think about our English?' This question reveals the questioners' concern about NESs' authority in terms of the English used and learned by Chinese people. This question becomes interesting when taking into consideration the demographic change in the English-speaking world and the insights offered by ELF research. Thus, this paper sets out to examine the extent to which Chinese speakers care about NESs' judgments, and discusses the findings in a wider socio-cultural context by adopting an emic perspective. All data used in the paper are retrieved from a large-scale study (Wang, 2012) on Chinese speakers' perceptions of their own English in intercultural communication, with the focus on Chinese speakers' linguistic choices in relation to the framework of reference to NESs. Through this paper, I respond to the question posed to me. And my answer is: 'Do we care?'

## Background

According to Kachru's (1990: 4) categorization, China is a country where English is learned and used mainly for the purpose of intercultural communication as opposed to intracultural communication. Traditionally, English plays the role of a foreign language in China. NESs are major interlocutors with whom Chinese speakers use English to communicate. This practice can be traced back to the early stage of English use in China, when British commercial ships arrived in some Chinese ports to usher in the role of English as a major medium of business transaction. Subsequently, missionaries from America and Britain started English education in order to 'convert' Chinese people (Bolton, 2003: 230). For many years, English, alongside other languages, such as Japanese, Korean, French, German, Spanish, to name just a few, was used by 'foreign-language talents' in job markets for communication with different L1 speakers from outside China, although English rather than other L1s was usually the foreign language to be learned and examined in compulsory education. As a foreign language, English was exclusively modeled on the English as a native language (ENL) provided by NESs who generate norms of English in the monolingual settings they are from.

Today the role of English as a foreign language (EFL) is weakening, given the omnipresent influence of globalization and the Internet. The command of English is not limited to 'English talents' in job markets, and the use of English frequently takes place in various domains and for different purposes. For example, Chinese tourists do not have to rely on tour guides who can speak Japanese, Korean or some European languages when they visit Japan, Korea, and some European countries. Rather, they can use English to communicate with different local peoples. In a sense, English serves as lingua franca between Chinese people and other L1 speakers today. The changing role and status of English in China opens up the possibility of considering Chinese speakers' English on its own terms, situated in the wider communicative order shaped by the globalization of English.

## Theoretical debates on NESs' authority

The global phenomenon of ELF has motivated the criticism of NESs' authority over NNESs. A groundbreaking question concerns 'the ownership of English' (Widdowson, 1994, 2003: 35–44), which essentially requires us to think about who can claim the right of creative use of English in an era when NNESs are making English their own. Jenkins (2006: 138–141, 2015: 26) distinguishes ELF from EFL, arguing that NNESs use English in their own ways that are different from, but not deficient to, the way that NESs use English. Seidlhofer (2003, 2011) puts forward the idea that ELF is different from *the* English used by NESs, which is traditionally conceptualized as ENL. Following this, she argues that both NESs and NNESs adopt ELF and adapt their ways of using English in order to ensure communicative success in intercultural encounters. Mauranen's (2012: 29) 'similect' concept offers a theoretical understanding of NNESs' distinct ways of using English. According to her, NNESs from various L1 backgrounds are influenced by their L1s, which parallel each other and contribute to varied Englishes marked by distinguishable elements of different L1s. In support of these arguments, a body of empirical research into the ELF phenomenon has uncovered some features of NNESs' use of ELF in terms of phonology, lexis, syntax, discourse, and pragmatics (e.g. Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins,


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2000; Mauranen, 2012). These findings centered on ELF make the approximation to native speaker competence or the conformity to native English norms an irrelevant pursuit in intercultural communication. This thus broadens the horizon of understanding English and its development.

## Empirical insight into Chinese speakers' language choices

The exploration of Chinese speakers' language choices is based on the investigation into Chinese speakers' perceptions of their own English in intercultural communication (Wang, 2012). The focus is on some participants' narratives of their English encounters. I collected the data through 24 semi-structured interviews with Chinese university students, who were either English or non-English majors, and eleven semi-structured interviews with professionals whose job responsibilities involved intercultural communication through English to different extents. Mandarin Chinese was adopted as the shared repertoire between the researcher, i.e. myself, and the participants so as to create an atmosphere enabling easy communication. For this reason, transcriptions and data analysis were originally in Chinese but were translated into English for the purpose of this paper. In addition, all data reported here are anonymous. The participants' language choices with regards to the reference to NESs are categorized into three general types, each of which I discuss with examples.

### Type 1: NESs' English in disparaging terms

The interview data reveals frequent mentions of 'bad English' or 'erroneous English'. However, in those participants' explanation of what they labeled as 'bad' or 'erroneous', NESs' English seems to be cast in disparaging terms. Litao's view is typical among those who are confident in their choice of other language forms to NESs' English.

Example (1)

Litao: Their English might be, if we compare their English with the standard, I mean the authentic English, their English is very bad. But they have no problem in communication at all.

Litao is aware how his colleagues' English would be judged with reference to 'authentic English' and sees the gap between the English prescribed to be 'the standard' and the English actually found in practice. He uses an adversative conjunction to bring in his reconsideration of what he describes as 'bad' English. This extract gives no impression of hesitation, suggesting his ready answer to the question about whether he cares about NESs' norms. It also shows his confidence in variations from NESs' English. Noticeably, he is describing his colleagues' group behavior rather than his own. By doing this, he seems to suggest how common it is to use English in a way that does not agree with NESs' style. Further, he shows his preference to 'overuse' certain forms rather than seeking lexical richness for the purpose of easy communication with interlocutors (see Example 2).

Example (2)

Litao: We have many customers who're non-native speakers of English, their (English), if compared with native speakers' English, is more practical and simplified. We would think, this word, the interlocutor wouldn't like to use another word, because he only knows this word, for example, the word *confirm*, he would use *confirm* all the time, not any other word, ; he would, for example, if you use *ensure*, he would be annoyed, he would possibly not understand.

R: So in such circumstances, you would choose –

Litao: – right, the word we all feel happy with. I know what *confirm* means, and he knows it too. So we *confirm*.

Using some lexical examples, Litao shows a focus on communication. He explains how he avoids using different words to mean the same things in English so as to reduce possible risks of annoying the interlocutors and why he sticks to lexical choices which he thinks are common to both sides of the communication. Despite his knowledge of different styles of English use between NNESs and NESs, Litao makes language choices on the basis of his judgment that NNESs' English is 'more practical and simplified' than NESs' English.

### Type 2: NESs' English as a distant idol

Some participants tend to see NESs' English as a distant idol for NNESs, but they choose to use English in the way that fits in their NNES repertoire. Suyu is one of these participants.

Example (3)

R: Are you happy with your English?

Suyu: NO. I hope I can achieve, of course, it's impossible now, I hope I can speak


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English that is like their English. Their pronunciation sounds nicer indeed [. . .]

R: So, unattainable goal, shall we still work hard towards it?

Suyu: Definitely I won't. <@> But to answer your question, of course I should say this is the ultimate goal <@> [. . .] I'm ok that an American wouldn't find it difficult when he listens to me speaking English [. . .] I don't need to be acknowledged (as a good speaker of English). I'm all right as long as he can easily communicate with me [. . .] I don't need his acknowledgement (that I'm a good user). Anyway, he is not my boss, he doesn't pay my salary @.

Suyu indicates an aspiration toward NESs' English and admits that NESs' pronunciation 'sounds nicer indeed'. The utterance *but to answer your question, of course I should say this is the ultimate goal* shows a presumably default answer to the question about whether we, i.e. Chinese speakers, should approximate toward ENL. The phrase *of course* shows no room for any doubtfulness. Noticeably, however, he does not seem to take NESs' English seriously. He laughs when he talks about 'the ultimate goal'. In contrast, he appears more serious when indicating his unwillingness to invest time and effort to imitate NESs and further explaining what he looks for when communicating in English. While he is aware of what is prescribed about English in principle, he does not care how NESs judge his English, as revealed in the joke that NESs do not pay his salary.

### Type 3: NESs' English as a necessary reference

A number of participants treat NESs' English seriously, deferring to the framework of reference to NESs' English regarding what is correct and what is wrong. Their explanation reveals two major themes connected with their opinion, i.e. the Standard English ideology (SEI) and the prestige of English in China. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the SEI, an undoubtedly complex construct, it is helpful to adopt Seidlhofer's (2011: 42–61) definition, which basically highlights the 'nativeness' of English and links the SEI to the old-fashioned construct that captures language as an entity based on fixed norms and belonging to a confined territory. This study reveals that the SEI feeds into some participants' position regarding whether they should look to NESs for reference. These participants emphasize 'nativeness', 'standardness', 'norms' and 'rules' in describing what makes English English. For example, Ping draws a presumed link between nativeness and the notion of English.

Example (4)

Ping: We're learning English. That is, we're learning their language. We should learn [English] in respect of THEIR culture and THEIR language. So we say they [i.e. variations from ENL] are errors in our subconscious mind.

Ping makes explicit the equation between English and 'their language', i.e. NESs' language. He shows a strong sense of 'ownership' of English by using and emphasizing the possessive adjective *their* in referring to English. At the same time, English, culture and NESs' possession of them are closely tied together. By pointing to the links embedded in his 'subconscious mind', Ping exhibits his firm belief behind his judgment of what are errors.

Another participant, Dafei, seems to treat English as an entity formed by rules and norms. He claims that variations from the 'the basic rules' would presumably distort the entity (see Example 5).

Example (5)

Dafei: [. . .] that way breaks the basic rules of English. I mean, the grammatical rules [. . .] If you change it, English can't be called English. Although Chinese-flavored English is used this way, I just feel this way has made itself un-English. You should know there is a difference between *he* and *she*. If you change this, this is not acceptable.

In contrast, some participants seem to take a position against the SEI. They evaluate linguistic behaviors on their own terms rather than looking to the reference to NESs. They discuss in a positive manner the communicative effect of variations from ENL norms and the value of having their own English regarding their need for 'Chineseness'. Nevertheless, they opt for NESs' English, with a shared reason supporting their decisions. The reason points to the prestige of NESs' English in China. Tension thus arises between their beliefs about what kind of English is acceptable and what kind of English is prestigious in the society. They are likely to struggle or feel forced in making language choices. For example, Mei describes her struggle regarding whether to defer to NESs, when making comments on different Englishes.



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Example (6)

Mei: I've always believed that intelligibility is everything. If other people can get what you mean, your English can be considered intelligible to them. But I'm struggling. I don't think I'm going to use English this way myself, because I think nobody would use it this way in formal occasions. Such use of English is just for the purpose of jokes. So English like this should be limited to the situation when you want to make jokes. I'm just in chaos.

Mei has only one criterion for her language choice, that is, communicative effectiveness. She struggles when she realizes that there is little room for other Englishes than ENL in society. Her judgment of social prestige is based on the observation of English used in 'formal occasions'. Despite the fact that she values the intelligibility and the humor invoked through the flexible use of English, she would not like to take the risk of overlooking the social prestige of NESs' English.

The education system is often a major device used to maintain the social prestige of language and to manage language practice in a society (Lippi-Green, 1994: 167; Shohamy, 2006). Not surprisingly, the social prestige of NESs' English is a salient factor in influencing language choices among participants who are university students. 'Examination', 'tests', 'university requirement', and 'marks' are buzzwords in their comments on different forms of English. For example, Yifei makes a 'choice' that she would not have made if she were not 'required' to do so, and claims that other students would do the same.

Example (7)

Yifei: I think it's all right as long as my English can make me understood. I don't mind how close my English is to Standard English.

R: Hmm, then will you seek –

Yifei: – HOWEVER, the reality is that we're required to use [Standard English] [. . .] the criteria that the university uses, that teachers use, give no space to what we said just now, that the English is all right as long as the user makes himself understood. So, me and other students, until the reality has been changed, we'll work towards the standard, I'll aim for the standard.

## Discussion

The data provide insights into the extent to which individual Chinese speakers care about NESs' authority in their use of English. Those who are not serious about the reference to NESs show signs of claiming Chinese speakers' ownership of English. Other participants, who deem the reference to NESs as necessary, are influenced by the SEI and the social prestige of NESs' English. There is the hope that the SEI and the prestige of NESs' English will gradually give way to linguistic diversity and free language choices. Despite the controversy regarding whether ELF is teachable, promoting awareness of how English works today is helpful (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Wang, 2015). In Wang's (2015) focus group study, Chinese university students are found to benefit from their own or observed ELF experiences and guided exploration of the ELF phenomenon in understanding English in the world today. Situated in the context where ELF use is becoming growingly prominent, the young generation of Chinese speakers will have the opportunity to develop language awareness.

Bringing an ELF perspective into classrooms can be challenging, given the traditionally NES-oriented English education in China. Nonetheless, signs are emerging in China to welcome an ELF perspective. The education policy has increased the weight of Chinese in university entrance examination while reducing that of English. This might suggest a reduced investment of time and effort on English and thus relaxed attitudes toward the conformity to NESs' English. As Jenkins (2014: 160) argues, NNESs can spend much time and effort in order to approximate NESs' English only if they are willing to do so. In addition, the dilemma between the desired benefits of English for national development and the importance attached to Chinese for national cohesion seems to call for ELF. As Mauranen (2012: 2) notes, 'lingua francas are used by speakers who maintain their first languages'. Moreover, the conceptualization of ELF values NNESs' first languages, which are accepted as part of NNESs' linguistic resources. In this respect, code switching is acknowledged as one of the strategies for successful communication (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2006: 147).

The entry of ELF into the discourse of Chinese education might be flagged by the Eighth International Conference of ELF held in Beijing in August 2015. The conference was co-hosted by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), which is a key English textbook provider


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in China, and the Beijing Foreign Studies University, which is a key institution focusing on the study of modern languages in China. The FLTRP also runs a blog inviting opinions and views about ELF. While a large number of Chinese teachers of English subscribe to the website, it is optimistic to think that the concept of ELF is within the reach of English education in China.

## Conclusion

Along with the changing status and role of English in China, Chinese speakers' language ideologies are changing. Central to the change is the decreasing concern for the role of NESs as norm-providers. NESs are cast in disparaging terms or just treated as idols that are not relevant to Chinese speakers' language choices in real life. On the other hand, the SEI and the social prestige of NESs' English are major factors undermining Chinese speakers' free choice of language forms. However, signs are found in the country to welcome an ELF perspective. Therefore, it can be hoped that Chinese speakers will claim their ownership of English in the near future.

### Key to transcription conventions

| | |
|---|---|
| , | Continuing pitch contour |
| . | Pause shorter than three seconds |
| [. . .] | Material omitted |
| UTTERANCE | Emphatic utterance (i.e. with raised pitch or volume) |
| [utterance] | Author's clarification or elaboration |
| @ | Laughter |
| <@>utterance<@> | Speaking with laughter |
| Utterance - | Utterance being interrupted |
| - utterance | Interruption |
| R | Researcher |

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